



FIRE-BREAK FARM

By *Tilda Mims*
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Brown Creek is a tributary of the noted Cahaba River just to the north, and it enters and exits the Morrisses' pond.

George and Sandi Morris work together as equal partners in their marriage, their church, and their forest stewardship. Since 1990, they have worked side by side on Fire-Break Farm in Bibb County, doing hard and dirty work that more than earns the term "sweat equity." Sandi loves the farm as much as George and they are proud of doing all the work on the farm themselves.

They worked the land for several years as caretakers for absentee land-owners. The owners did not want trees removed, so the Morrisses were very lim-

ited in what they could do to enhance its productivity. In 1990, the owners decided to sell, but wanted the property to remain with people who would love it and care for it . . . they chose George and Sandi Morris.

The couple knew they were blessed with an opportunity as well as a significant challenge. The tract had been high-graded more than 50 years earlier and not actively managed since. The absence of thinning, harvesting, or burning made risk of wildfire substantial and access to the farm limited. Large quantities of loblolly pine were stunted due to over-

stocking and the whitetail deer population was very small.

The Morrisses realized the untapped potential of the land and were eager to get to work. They asked consultant forester Terry Jacobs of Tuscaloosa to prepare a Stewardship Plan for the property in 1992, and Fire-Break was certified as a TREASURE Forest that same year.

In slightly more than ten years, they have proven not only good stewards of the land, but outstanding leaders and role models in multiple-use forest management as well. Their commitment



Photo by Tilda Mims

received statewide recognition in 2002 when they were awarded the Helene Mosley Memorial TREASURE Forest Award for Northwest Alabama.

Timber Management

Their stewardship plan called for immediate action to get pine stands in maximum production. After a select harvest cut left only vigorous sawtimber candidates growing, an intensive prescribed burning program was established that includes a burn every three to four years to reduce fuel and encourage healthy wildlife habitat.

Pine plantations are on a 35-40 year rotation until harvest. Regular thinnings are scheduled at 12-15 years and on an “as-needed” basis until final harvest. Insect-damaged trees are felled and disposed of promptly throughout the year.

Fire-Break Farm now boasts 157 forested acres with 52 acres of mature pines and 30 acres of pine plantation. An additional 75 acres of pine/hardwood mixed stands prevent erosion along drains and provide wildlife habitat. All trees are now flourishing under careful management and excellent site selection.

This young rabbit (right) and deer (below right) are just two of many animals making their homes at Fire-Break Farm. (Bottom left) Showy wildflowers are a special treat along the banks of the lake.

Wildlife Habitat Enhancement

The Morrisses take every opportunity to protect and promote wildlife habitat. In fact, it is not entirely accurate to say that wildlife is their *secondary* objective because they feel so strongly about the protection and development of wildlife habitat.

Wildlife enhancement began by clearcutting two small upland hardwood areas and planting them back to loblolly pine. This created some much needed foraging and bedding areas for deer. More than 1,000 autumn olive, 3,000 sawtooth oak, and 75 fruit trees were planted as permanent food plots. Loblolly pine and lespedeza were planted around open fields to enhance edge

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Photo courtesy of the Morrisses

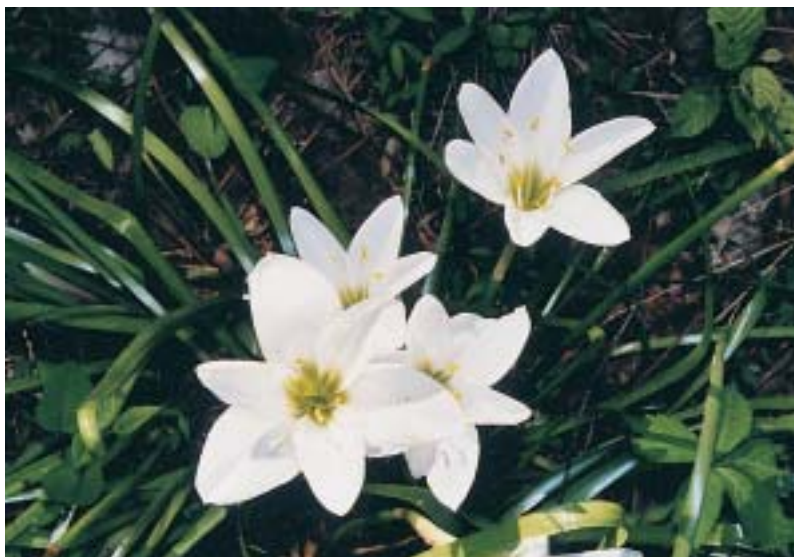


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More than eight miles of permanent fire lanes and interior roads are maintained on Fire-Break Farm.

effect. Pines around fields are on a pruning program to increase clear wood and control unwanted vegetation.

Seven food plots totaling eight acres target specific seasonal needs of wildlife. Winter foods include Ladino and crimson clovers as well as wheat. An additional eight acres are planted each year in grain sorghum, corn, peas, and sunflowers. Ten acres of pasture is mowed to maintain open areas. Windrows have been retained for habitat enhancement.

More than eight miles of permanent fire lanes and interior roads are main-

tained with water bars and turnouts to prevent erosion and serve as linear wildlife openings for deer and ground-nesting birds.

The Morrisses established 40-50 bluebird boxes that annually house at least 30 nesting pairs plus a variety of flying and gray squirrels.

Numerous bird feeders, hummingbird feeders, and duck boxes are scattered about the farm. Six battery-powered supplemental feeders maintain both game and non-game species.

Recreation

Sandi and George both love hunting and regularly invite family and friends to join them. They have 22 tree stands and seven shooting houses. Two shooting houses accommodate both an adult and a child for supervised hunting. They are currently working on fencing the property to limit access.

Another major project the Morrisses undertook was rebuilding a small farm pond into a four-acre pond stocked with bass, bream, sunfish, red-eared sunperch, and grass carp. Brown Creek is a tributary of the Cahaba

River just to their north, and it enters and exits the pond.

In 2002, they built a one and one-half story 24' x 24' rustic cabin overlooking the pond. They used building materials salvaged from an old homeplace on the property which was built from timber grown on the farm. It has an outhouse and a pump for water at the kitchen sink. They plan to use it to give children and school groups a taste of rustic life.

Fire-Break

George and Sandi moved from Tuscaloosa to the farm outside Centreville more than six years ago. The name "Fire-Break Farm" has a literal meaning for this family. George has worked for the Tuscaloosa Fire Department since 1978, and working on the farm is a "break" from his firefighting job. Sandi owned a successful Tuscaloosa business for many years and finds that Fire-Break gives her the respite she needs as well.

They enjoy sharing their farm with others, also giving them a little "break." They welcome 4-H Forestry Judging Competitions and FFA Forestry and Land Judging Competitions each year, and routinely host church events and local landowner tours.

Their greatest joy, however, comes from inviting children who haven't experienced a day on a farm. They sponsor annual Youth Hunt Weekends, school field trips, and special tours for underprivileged children who delight in the chance to fish, walk through the woods, and see wild animals. These youngsters also have the opportunity to see strong family values and the rewards of American work ethics in action at Fire-Break Farm. 🌲

Sandi and George Morris (left) have planted many flowering trees and shrubs to enhance their farm. They also built this rustic cabin overlooking the pond.



Photo by Tilda Mims



Photo by Tilda Mims



Photo courtesy of the Morrisses